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ABSTRACT

Ther are several reasons for studying the ethnic European influence in American literature. First, with the exception of American's native Indians, we are all immigrants who have come to America to seek a better life. Secondly, every American should know something about the heritage of his fellow Americans. Thirdly, by not knowing the ethnic writings of our literature we derive ourselves of a rich body of literature. And finally, through our ethnic literature our horizons will be broadened. Several current anthologies which include European ethnic literature are listed and their contents compared to past anthologies of American literature which include very few writers of ethnic stock. (LL)

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THE EUROPEAN ETHNIC PRESENCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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When I received the invitation to discuss in twenty minutes "The European Ethnic Presence in American Literature" I was puzzled by the intention of the program chairman.

Was I supposed to discuss the contributions to American literature of authors of European origin (presumably not Anglo-Saxon) or Was I to discuss the presence of scenes and characters from European countries in American literature by authors, regardless of their origin or was I to discuss the contributions of writers from groups known as minorities as they referred to their American experiences? Not being certain of which approach to use, I did what all scholars should do, I consulted the authorities in this field. Their answers are interesting in themselves.

Theodore L. Gross, editor of A Nation of Nations: Ethnic Literature in America[1], replied:

> "The title they gave you is indeed confusing. You probably can impose your own interpretation on it. My own inclination would be to take the simpler of the two alternatives you suggest: discuss the literature of hyphenated - Americans.... My own thoughts would turn to a few people like Potok."

Daniel Walden, editor of On Being Jewish and other anthologies of American ethnic writers, replied, among other suggestions,

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> "I would try to do a socio-historical treatment sorts of the European groups. (German and Irish of the early 19th century, Italian, Jews, of the New Immigration) who made an impact on American lit and leave the rest alone; I would then go on to spell out some of this in literature -- Farrell, O'Hara, et. al for Irish; Di Donato to Puzo, Cahan to Bellow for Jews."[2]

Anthony Roy Mangione, co-author of the Image of Pluralism in American Literature: The American Experience of European Ethnic Group; replied

> "I believe .. that the subject matter should be about European ethnic groups but only about ethnic groups that interact with the American experience. Thus, work by American authors of European descent in my judgment would not suffice; The works would have to be by European or by European-American authors and would have to deal primarily with the hyphenated experience."[3]

Finally I turned to Max T. Schulz, whose Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish/American Novelists has given me much pleasure and profit. In answer to my query, he left the decision to me:

> "That is, either a discussion of the presence in American Literature of scenes and characters of European background, or a discussion of The American authors of European origin."[4]

My decision was ultimately made for me by the recent publication of about a dozen excellent anthologies - all containing distinguished selections by authors of minority groups, dealing with their experiences as members of minorities in the American milieu. Let me first mention some of these ~~nth~~anthologies. Among them you should know the following:

1. Theodore L. Gross, editor, A Nation of Nations. New York: Free Press, 1971.

2. Lillian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw, editors, Speaking for Ourselves: American Ethnic Writing, 2nd edition. Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1975.

3. Myron Simon, editor, Ethnic Writers in America, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

4. Edward Itkovic, editor, American Letter: Immigrant and Ethnic Writing. Englewood Cliff, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

5. Peter Rose, editor, Nation of Nations: The Ethnic Experience and the Racial Crisis. New York: Random House, 1972.

6. Thomas C. Wheeler, editor, The Immigrant Experience. New York: Penguin Books, 1971.

7. Edmund J. Farrell, et al., I/you we/they. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1975.

8. Katherine D. Newman, editor, Ethnic American Stories. New York: Washington Square Press, 1975.

9. Theodore L. Gross, editor, The Literature of American Jews. New York: Macmillan, 1973.

10. Abraham Chapman, editor, Jewish-American Literature. New York: New American Library, 1974.

11. Wayne Charles Miller, editor, A Gathering of Ghetto Writers. New York: New York University Press, 1972.

12. Leonard Kriegel and Abraham H. Lass, editors, Stories of the American Experience. New York: New American Library, 1975.

These dozen volumes could be multiplied a hundredfold by listing all the novels, plays, poems and works of criticism written in the current century alone by authors of non-Anglo-Saxon background who originated from the European continent. This does not include the many important contributions made by Black Americans, Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Indian-Americans.

What a contrast this wealth of ethnic American literature presents to the situation fifty years ago! And here I am making my first major point. In 1920, Benjamin A. Heydrick edited a collection of short stories called Americans All: Stories of American Life of Today. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1920). There was one author of Irish extraction, Myra Kelly; two authors of Jewish extraction, Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst; and one Black, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Where are representatives of other ethnic groups, who were certainly writing at that time?

Another instance of the contrast in anthologies fifty odd years ago is seen in Louis Untermeyer's Modern American Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921). The only three poets of Jewish extraction are Babette Deutsch, Alter Brody, and Horace Traubel. However, in the 1962 edition we find the following: Delmore Schwartz, Muriel Rukeyser, Karl Shapiro, Stanley Kunitz, and Jean Starr Untermeyer.

This does not mean that writers of the many ethnic stocks were not writing either in English or in their native languages. They certainly were! But an examination of the anthologies on both the high school and college levels reveals a woeful lack of content by non-Anglo-Saxon authors. Let me cite a few examples:

1. Robert Shafer's American Literature (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1926) does not have a single selection.

2. Jay B. Hubbell's American Life in Literature (New York: Harper and Brother, 1936) does not have a single European ethnic author although it does include Longfellow's "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" and Edmund Clarence Stedman's very unflattering "Israel Freyer's Bid for Gold."

3. In the 1949 edition, Hubbell included a portion of Ole Rolvaag's (Norwegians) Giants in the Earth and Willa Cather's short story, "Neighbor Rosicky" (Czechs).

4. Norman Foerster's; American Poetry and Prose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 3rd ed. 1947) includes Longfellow's "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," Willa Cather,s. "Neighbor Rosicky," Dorothy Parker,s "Just a Little One," James T. Farrell's "A Jazz-Age Clerk" and Walter Lippmann's "Education vs. Western Civilization."

5. In the 4th edition of 1957, Foerster included five poems by Karl Shapiro and Finley Peter Dunne's "On Machinery" and "Review of the Rough Riders."

6. Walter Blair, Theodore Hornberger, Randall Stewart, and James E. Miller, Jr. The Literature of the United States (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1966, 3rd Edition). In Volume I there is Longfellow's "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport". Volume II contains several poems by Karl Shapiro, Bernard Malamud's "The Jewbird," Saul Bellow's "Looking for Mr. Green."

7. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and George Perkins, editors, The American Tradition in Literature (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974, 4th Edition). Jewish authors include Allen Ginsberg, Howard Nemerov, Denise Levertov, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Karl Shapiro, Delmore Schwartz, Muriel Rukeyser. The Irish are represented by James T. Farrell and Stephen Crane. The Italians are represented by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Earlier I have already listed some of the more recently published anthologies which have made up for the neglect of ethnic writers. What has brought this change about? Edward Itkovic in his recently published American Letter: Immigrant and Ethnic Writing, 1975) expresses it well:

> "But the new Black and Red consciousness has contributed to the ethnic consciousness of all Americans. Many WASP's are now seeing themselves as a definite ethnic group. They are thus thinking in ways heretofore alien to them. Germans, Italians, Slavs, and Jews have expressed great interest in their ethnic heritages. Black, Indian, and Hispanic publicity has fostered a desire by many third, fourth, fifth generation Americans

> to rediscover the old ways. Secure Americans now, they are no longer products of calculated and obvious discrimination and these White ethnics now want to remember the traditions from which they grew: the music, the foods, the old beliefs, the stories passed down through generations. In the shattered, panicked world of the 1960's Americans of all types needed roots. They naturally began turning to the past. According to Marcus Hansen, what the second generation wishes to forget, the third wishes to remember. The changing of the Immigration Act of 1965 symbolized a new attitude. Societies sprung up among groups like the Italian and Polish, the Jewish and the Norwegian, all designed to reinstitute traditional ethnic mores in American life. We are achieving Louis Adamic's dream of a diversified America profiting by its very diversity."[5]

Of What Value is the Study of Ethnic Literature?

That more and more ethnic content is appearing in our literature, no one can deny. Right now it would take a person several years to read the books listed in Inglehart and Mangione's The Image of Pluralism in American Literature. And the books keep multiplying in geometric progression. At this point in time, we should pause and ask ourselves what we can do for our students in secondary school or even in college by making them aware of our multi-ethnic literary heritage.

First, we should emphasize that, with the exception of the native Indians, we are all immigrants, coming to America to seek a better life. The Black experience is somewhat different since the Blacks were forced to come here against their will. But they very much want and are entitled to their share in the American Dream.

Every American has a right and responsibility to know his or her heritage: religious, cultural and literary. Too many second and third generation Americans have been ashamed of the native language, the personal habit, the customs and traditions of their parents and grandparents. To know some of the problems they encountered before they came to America and upon their arrival is to appreciate their greatness. As the main justification for compiling their anthology Speaking For Ourselves. Lillian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw stated

> "We are concerned... with the two-thirds of the American Population that is not White Anglo-Saxon Protestant native born of native parentage. The writers here represent groups that have had distinct problems of adjustment to American life: Many members of these groups have lived in ghettos, experienced the discomfort of poverty, had their identities diminished by others to a pejorative term, and most of them have suffered from the alienation that takes place between the generations within ethnic groups."[6]

Perhaps a knowledge of the searing experiences our fathers and grandfathers went through will develop a greater respect for them - alas, posthumosly, and inspire a more compassionate attitude to the newer immigrants who keep coming to our shores.

By knowing our heritage, we can contribute more to our community, state and nation.

Speaking specifically about the contribution of his fellow Jews to American civilization the distinguished philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen in his Reflections of a Wandering Jew states cogently:

> "The fortunate fact that America is culturally as well as politically federalistic rather than nationalistic gives evey group a chance to contribute its inherited tradition to the common stock of American and human civilization. We must plan to participate fully in all American cultural activities, for thus only can we contribute to the common good. On the other hand, it is neither safe nor dignified to ignore our peculiar inheritance and try to become more imitatious of the English, Scotch, Irish, Dutch, Swedes, Huguenots Germans who came over on the various subsequent sailings of the Mayflower. We can make the most effective contribution to civilization by being our own selves and not mere slavish copies of others."[7]

Secondly, every American should know something about the heritage of his fellow Americans. Prejudice comes from fear and ignorance. It is amazing how many distinguished American authors whom we have studied because they represented the best in American thought, were themselves prejudiced toward later arrivals. Thus Thoreau in his Walden and elsewhere makes pejorative remarks about the Irish. James Russell Lowell, who was our Ambassador to the Court of St. James, could not stand Jews and worried about the perils of letting so many of them come in to the U.S. Henry Adams whose Education of Henry Adams has been read by countless American College students as an outstanding autobiography of an outstanding man, warned against the appointment of Louis D. Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather, who drew sympathetic portraits of German and Slavic immigrants became anti-semites in their later years. If these highly educated and artistically talented individuals could be prejudiced -- and the numbers of such people could reach into the tens of thousands - what can we expect of the ordinary guy who has little time for

reading about other people and even less inclination.?

Thirdly, by not knowing the ethnic writings of our literature we deprive ourselves of a rich body of literature from Puzo to Pietro di Donato from Saroyan to Hagopian, from Emma Lazarus to Saul Bellow, from Karl Shapiro to Howard Nemerov. There are scores of brilliant writers who have written thousands of beautiful compassionate artistically constructed novels, plays, poems and non-fiction. What a pity to remain ignorant of them for whatever reason! We ourselves as teachers owe it to ourselves to become acquainted with this rich body of ethnic literature; but we have the greater obligation to acquaint our students in school and college.

Finally, there is the important matter of widening our horizons through our ethnic literature. There are over fifty ethnic groups that have come to America. The 130,000 South Vietnamese is only the latest, not the last. The more richly we live through knowledge of the literature of these varied groups, the richer our lives will be, the more open-minded we and our students will become and closer will come the realization of the American Dream.

Let me conclude by reading an item from The New York Times from August 26, 1975.

> Isaac Bashevis Singer, who writes his stories of dybbuks and shtetls in Yiddish for later translation, received an honorary doctorate of letters on the weekend from Texas Christian University, the Fort Worth school sponsored by the Disciples of Christ. Mr. Singer, who was accompanied by his wife, Alma, was cited as "a conservator of a language and a religious tradition." The citation also said that T.C.U. "students and faculty have learned from his

spirit and his craftsmanship." Mr. Singer was a speaker at the school's 1972 writing-award program and will return in April to lecture for a week.

Where but in America would a university sponsored by the Disciples of Christ give an honorary doctorate of letters to an author of Polish Jewish extraction who writes in Yiddish and is invited to lecture to the students of this university on the art, and craftsmanship of writing?

Where, indeed, but in America?

Footnotes

1. Theodore L. Gross, editor, A Nation of Nations. New York: The Free Press, 1971.

2. Daniel Walden, editor, On Being Jewish. Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1974.

3. Babette F. Inglehart and Anthony R. Mangione, The Image of Pluralism in American Literature: The American Experience of European Ethnic Groups. New York: Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity of the American Jewish Committee.

4. Max F. Schulz, Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish American Novelists. Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univerisity Press. 1969.

5. Edward Itkovic, editor, American Letter: Immigrant and Ethnic Writing. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice-Hall, 1975, p. xiii.

6. Faderman and Bradshaw, op. cit., p.viii.

7. Quoted in Abraham Chapman, editor. Jewish-American Literature. New York: New American Library, 1974.

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